



UNDERSTANDING WHITETAIL BROWSING PRESSURE

Are deer eating you out of house and home?
Here's a look at all things overbrowsing and some
solutions you can implement.

■ by *Josh Honeycutt*

Whitetail land management involves many facets. Habitat is one, as it's vital to the success of a deer herd and hunters. Folks who hope to maximize the potential of their hunting properties — more specifically, their food plots — must understand the full scope of whitetail browsing pressure.

That includes many elements. Observing habitat, studying current food sources, and interpreting how much impact deer are having on them are crucial in evaluating the browsing pressure at a property. Further, assessments affect the next steps a land manager should or shouldn't take.

UNDERSTAND HOW WHITETAILS FEED

Some people believe that whitetails are browsers, much like cattle and other ruminants. That's not the case. Whitetails are best described as concentrate selectors. Deer select the best parts of the best plants available to them.

According to Penn State University (ecosystems.psu.edu/research/centers/private-forests/news/scouting-for-deer-this-fall-scout-for-deer-browse-too), deer must consume 6 to 8 percent of their body weight in food each day. For a 200-pound deer, that's about 14 pounds per 24 hours.

When food sources become depleted, deer can no longer select the best parts of the best plants. Instead, they must consume less nutritious parts of remaining plants. When that happens, overbrowsing becomes more of an issue. When more than the smallest, most nutritious parts of a plant are consumed, regeneration becomes more difficult for that plant. When deer are forced to eat farther down the plant, it leads to habitat damage, including crop depredation, food plot destruction and the degradation of

natural browse. Obviously, the imbalance of deer density and food source availability can lead to overbrowsing.

COMBAT OVERBROWSING

When overbrowsing is a concern, you have three options. The first and most important is to reduce the deer density. Second, and equally important, is to offer more and better-quality food sources. And third, implement quick fixes to limit or delay overbrowsing severity.

If overbrowsing is serious enough, bring in a biologist to gauge the deer population and property's carrying capacity. Then, tags allowing, remove the necessary number of deer.

Obviously, converting more of the landscape into food for deer is vital, too. Increasing the acreage that provides nutrition will limit — and perhaps even eliminate — overbrowsing. Whitetail Institute offers various options to fit your land management goals. Select from an array of warm- and cool-season plants to boost herd health and increase habitat health.

Although increasing the tonnage of forage is the primary goal, another option to reduce premature food plot overbrowsing is planting something that's new to the local deer herd. Planting a food plot species that's new to the area can delay initial feeding until deer get used to the new option. So if you have a severe overbrowsing issue, consider planting a new food plot variety.

There are many other ways to keep deer out of food plots temporarily, too. First, consider an exclusion fence. Most exclusion fences are electric. For best results, run a dual-layer fence.

Usually, the outside fence is about 18 to 20 inches tall. A couple of feet inside of that, place another fence that's about 10 to 15 inches tall. Some market options run just one layer but with multiple strands at various heights.

Mesh fencing, which stands 7 to 8 feet tall, is a less common but viable option. Usually, that will deter deer. That's even more true for deer that aren't already used to mesh fencing.

In dire situations, implement aroma-based deterrents to temporarily limit exposure to deer. Examples include human hair, specialty sprays and other pungent odors.

Milorganite fertilizer is an extreme example of this. It's a byproduct of sewage processing. Although it's sold as a low-level fertilizer, it also deters white-tails, as they seem to greatly dislike its smell. Research studies have determined that food plots treated in this manner receive significantly less browsing pressure until the smell fades. This can allow young food plots to reach stages where they are more resistant to overbrowsing.

Obviously, it's good to plant proven food plot seed. Whitetail Institute's PowerPlant and Sunn Hemp products offer high-protein feed and have an incredible ability to withstand heavy browsing pressure.

Finally, if a food plot has been browsed

too heavily, consider replanting. Cover crops and nurse crops can aid in this battle, too.

GAUGE PROPERTY-LEVEL BROWSING PRESSURE

Understanding whether your property registers as being overbrowsed is crucial. That said, determining that is the true challenge. Fortunately, there are ways to observe and reach a conclusion.

First, use your eyes. Deer herds that are overpopulated or underserved with food tend to overbrowse and damage the landscape. Hunters must be able to recognize this and remedy it. Often, this is easier said than done. It takes a trained eye to see the signs.

As with any animal, whitetails prefer certain foods over others. Deer eat many types of plants (more than 700 plant species nationwide). However, certain food sources are more common. A few examples include red oak, white oak, maple, white ash and more popular tree species. Check those for browse pressure.

Of course, mature plants and trees are more resistant to browsing pressure.

Young trees, especially saplings, are at risk. When food is limited, deer can wipe out young growth quickly.

Next, study your crops and food plots. If they're not reaching acceptable heights at maturity, this can be a sign of heavy browsing. Other issues can cause this, but if you notice the tops have been cut out of each plant, leaving nothing but the stem, that's a browsing issue, not a soil quality issue.

Also, study natural vegetation. Do you see a browse line inside the timber? Is all early successional growth bitten back to nothing? Is there very little young growth remaining? If yes to any, but especially all, overbrowsing is likely the culprit.

Even if you don't have a trained eye for this, don't fret. Exclusion cages are optimal for determining exactly how much browsing pressure deer are applying to crops, food plots and even early successional habitat, such as saplings, shrubs and other browse.

Creating an exclusion cage is simple. Use a 3- to 5-foot-tall fence wire. Chicken wire can work if reinforced, but it's usually too flimsy. A stronger woven wire

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option with panel spacing tight enough that deer cannot reach through it is best.

Generally, a 6- to 12-foot link is ideal. Next, using gloves, create a cylinder out of the panel. Then, place it in a food plot, around an ideal tree sapling or amidst other food sources, and wire it together. Use at least two stakes opposite of each other to secure it in place. Safely wire the panel to the stakes.

Through time, you'll see how much deer and other animals are browsing down your crops, food plots and natural vegetation. This will help you determine the severity of the problem and let you take the necessary steps to protect your investments from overbrowsing, better serving the deer herd.



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